

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Bede's life and context

I

MICHELLE P. BROWN

Bede's life in context

Bede's biography and its sources

In AD 731, in the fifty-ninth year of his life, Bede concluded his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* with an autobiographical note in which he stated that 'it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write' (v. 24, p. 567). The *Ecclesiastical History* gives us our primary route into the early Anglo-Saxon world, yet the sources for our knowledge of the famous scholar-monk's life are sparse: his brief autobiographical note, which includes a list of his own writings; an account of his death by one of his pupils, Cuthbert; his correspondence, notably the letters he wrote to Egbert and Plegwin; his prefaces to his prose *Life of Saint Cuthbert* and to Book IV of his *On First Samuel*. These can be contextualized somewhat by other written sources, such as the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith* and passages in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which are based upon earlier annals, and by archaeological excavations and the remains of the material culture of the age. But for deeper insight into Bede's personality and philosophy of life we are reliant upon close reading and analysis of the nuances of his own works, in various areas of study, and upon examination of those things most familiar to him: his home, the twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow, its buildings, fittings and artefacts and, most importantly, the books he so loved – those he consulted and those that he helped to produce in his roles as author, editor and scribe.

Bede's writings

The *Ecclesiastical History* is only one of the forty-four works in Bede's list (which is incomplete, omitting *On the Holy Places*, *On Eight Questions* and two letters, those to Albinus and to Egbert). Yet it is for the *Ecclesiastical History* that he is principally remembered, because of its pioneering methodology and because it remains the single most important source for the early Anglo-Saxon period. Through it, Bede sought to weave his people into the broader fabric of the Christian story of salvation, in sequel to Eusebius of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BEDE

Caesarea's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* of the early Christian Church. Indeed, the very concept of 'Englishness' stems from Bede's attempts to construct a collective identity for the mêlée of peoples inhabiting the former Roman province of Britannia. However, the principal route to comprehending divine reality fully lay, for Bede and his peers, in the study of Christian Scripture and its interpretation by the Church Fathers. He therefore devoted the bulk of his research time, resulting in some twenty works, to biblical exegesis, and it is with these works of commentary, significantly, that his list of works begins. As later chapters in this volume will discuss, Bede's method in these exegetical writings involved excavating both the Old and New Testaments not only for literal meaning and archaeological detail but for multiple layers of allegorical interpretation through which the deeper spiritual meaning of Holy Writ might be discerned.

For understanding God's plan, nature also offered valuable insights; for as the Irish missionary Saint Columbanus (540–615) had proclaimed, nature is a second scripture in which God is perceived. So Bede's list includes works devoted to the operations of the natural world, of time and space. He wrote *On the Nature of Things*, building on the encyclopaedic approach to natural history of Pliny and Isidore of Seville (the work of Aristotle and the Alexandrian school having been lost to the West), and the volumes *On Times* and *The Reckoning of Time*. Chronological calculations had the potential to disrupt eternal harmony, especially when they related to Easter – the defining moment when God and humankind were reconciled. Bede's dating of the Incarnation to *annus mundi* ('the year of the world') 3952 – rather than the traditional date of 5199 established by Eusebius of Caesarea – led him perilously close to charges of heresy, as we know from his *Letter to Plegwin*, one of the precious few documents apart from his autobiographical note that sheds light on his life and personality. Bede's letter reveals his profound hurt, indignation and fury at being accused by 'lewd rustics' (*Letter to Plegwin*, p. 405), at the table of Bishop Wilfrid, of introducing dubious ideas of his own when conducting his chronological calculations, exposing him to suspicion of heresy on grounds of innovation. His friend Bishop Acca of Hexham had to encourage Bede to defend himself against similar criticism concerning his exegesis on the evangelists and their symbols.¹ As Bede was quick to point out in his reply to Acca, his critics' attacks stemmed from their own ignorance since, being less well-read than he, they were unaware of his implicit allusions to earlier authorities (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, pp. 7–8). By way of practical response, he effectively introduced footnotes, inserting s-shaped marginal marks beside biblical quotations and alphabetic characters to denote authors cited. He took pains to credit his sources, stating in his autobiographical note that the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Bede's life in context

Ecclesiastical History was based on facts 'gleaned either from ancient documents or from tradition or from my own knowledge' (v. 24, p. 567), while his preface cites at length those who supplied data (pp. 5–7).

Bede also recounted the lives of saints so that they might serve as role models for society. He compiled an innovative martyrology, improved the translation of the Greek *Passion of Saint Anastasius*, reworked Paulinus's metrical *Life of Saint Felix* in prose and composed verse and prose lives of a new English saint in the making, Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne (died 687). His objectivity as a historian may seem compromised, to modern readers, by his inclusion of miraculous events, but when writing hagiography it was unthinkable that miracles, the visible manifestation of sanctity, should be excluded as audiences expected them from their heroes. Yet, when writing about his personal heroes in the *History of the Abbots*, Bede eschewed such hagiographical devices because, in this instance, he was seeking to record their historical contribution, rather than to create cults for saintly founding fathers (see Chapter 12).

Bede devoted other works to language, the mechanics of which fascinated those who were becoming newly accustomed to communicating with the pen as well as the voice. Learning new languages also entails studying different patterns of thought and speech, and those encountered in Scripture inspired Bede to compose a treatise *The Figures of Rhetoric*, which he appended to his book on *The Art of Poetry*. A book of hymns 'in various metres and rhythms', a book of epigrams 'in heroic or elegiac verse', a treatise entitled *On Orthography* 'arranged according to the order of the alphabet' (v. 24, p. 571) and a collection of letters complete Bede's oeuvre.

Bede's life as a monk

The diversity of the writings included in Bede's list casts light on the nature of his educational background, steeped in the learning of the monastic schoolroom (on which see Chapter 7). In his autobiographical note, Bede tells us that he was born (672/3) on land belonging to Wearmouth-Jarrow (see Map 4). Wearmouth (Figure 1) was founded in 674 by the Northumbrian nobleman Benedict Biscop, who also founded Jarrow (Figure 2) in 681, and it is usually assumed that Bede's birthplace lay near the former in Sunderland. His family entrusted him to Abbots Biscop and Ceolfrith, successively, to be educated, and although we know nothing of his social background,² we may assume that he was of free birth and that his kin were Christians who aspired to learning and were wealthy enough to spare a son from other duties. Studying in the monastic schoolroom did not necessarily mean that pupils would embrace religious life, but one can imagine the boy Bede's omnivorous

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BEDE



1 The West Tower, St Peter's Church, Wearmouth (lower two stages and the nave wall date from the 670s)

love of knowledge and his delight in the regularity of the monastic life rendering him an eager novice. Bede spent the rest of his life at Wearmouth-Jarrow, devoting himself 'entirely to the study of the Scriptures' (*EH* v. 24, p. 567), observing the Benedictine-style communal rule of monastic life and singing the Offices daily. He probably moved to Jarrow with Ceolfrith when a community was established there in 681, although as the library was shared between the two locations – some seven miles apart – it is likely that he worked in both.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede
Edited by Scott DeGregorio
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Bede's life in context



2 St Paul's Church, Jarrold. The current chancel consists substantially of the eastern of the two seventh-century churches and was used by the community, including Bede

It may seem harsh for a child to be separated from family and consigned to perpetual institutionalization in a monastery. Yet this is perhaps not so different from many university dons, progressing from boarding school, through university, to the regimen of college fellow, enjoying a communal life of teaching and research. Bede would likewise have been cushioned from many of the trials and tribulations of his day, with its virulent warfare and competition for limited resources hard-won from trade and the land. His personal regimen was not, however, typical of monks of his day. Monastic rules were devised by the leaders of individual communities, drawing to varying extents upon those of important founding figures such as Saints Pachomius, Basil, Cassian, Columbanus and Benedict of Nursia. These might place greater or lesser emphasis upon communal life or the more ascetic, eremitic traditions of the Eastern desert fathers. Most rules, however, advocated chastity, personal poverty and the performance of the Divine Office, which entailed reciting or chanting the psalms, prayers and biblical readings eight times throughout each day and night at the various canonical hours. Time was also set aside each day for personal prayer and meditative private reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*) and for manual labour, which might vary in accordance with the gifts of the individual. In Bede's case, an unusually large allocation of time would have been devoted to his research and teaching activities. He would have taught in the schoolroom, no doubt

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BEDE

following the sort of curriculum established in the Canterbury school of Theodore and Hadrian – two learned figures from the Mediterranean world – in the late seventh century. This included the study of Latin, Greek, theology, exegesis, computistics, astronomy, medicine, poetry and Gregorian chant.³ The rest of his study time would have been spent in the library, which we can imagine containing large book cupboards (*armaria*) of the sort depicted in the Codex Amiatinus, stocked with volumes from the early Christian Mediterranean, Byzantium, the Christian Orient, Frankia, Ireland and other parts of England (for which see Love's discussion in Chapter 3). He would also have laboured in the scriptorium, drafting his own works with a metal stylus on wax-covered tablets, copying his words or those of earlier authorities and of Scripture in a fine calligraphic hand onto prepared calfskin (vellum) with a goose-quill, using inks and pigments made from local mineral, plant and animal extracts, prepared in the scriptorium by the monks themselves and their novice assistants.

Bede would also have had to undertake other forms of arduous manual work, as a sign of his monastic humility, and would have relinquished personal property, and the joys, pains and distractions of relationships with wife and family. In exchange, he gained security, the fellowship of the monastic *familia* and the eternal communion of saints – and fame: known as 'the Venerable' from as early as the ninth century, he is the only English Doctor of the Catholic Church (since 1899). As later chapters in this volume discuss, by the 780s Bede's relics were considered miracle-working by Alcuin, were collected by York, Fulda and Glastonbury, and were claimed at Durham to have been stolen from Jarrow in the mid eleventh century by an acquisitive keeper of Saint Cuthbert's shrine, Alfred Westow, being placed alongside Cuthbert in his coffin in Durham Cathedral.⁴ In 1370 Bede's relics were translated to the Galilee Chapel, where pilgrims were received and to which women visitors were restricted. There Bede lies, doorkeeper to this symbolic focus of Northumbria's identity, just as his *Ecclesiastical History* serves as portal to its origins.

Religious life was not always peaceful, however. The Jarrow community was decimated by plague in the late seventh century – one of the worst ever for pestilence and famine. From this event, however, possibly comes one further item of biographical information on Bede's life. According to the *Life of Ceolfrith*, at one point only Abbot Ceolfrith and 'one small boy' (long thought to be Bede) remained fit enough to sing the Office in the community's own church, the fabric of which survives as the present chancel of St Paul's Church, Jarrow – a place where Bede's presence feels very real indeed.⁵ Ceolfrith would have learned chant from John, the pope's own archcantor, who spent time at Wearmouth-Jarrow in the 680s (*EH* iv. 18), for music was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Bede's life in context

not written down until the ninth century and had to be taught *viva voce*. He would, in turn, have taught his brethren. Bede tells us, again in his autobiographical note, that at nineteen (692) he became deacon, responsible for reading the Gospel during the liturgy, and at thirty (702), the age at which Christ began his ministry, he was ordained priest. Most monks did not take priestly orders, but Bede was called to both vocations.

In addition to this episode from the *Life of Ceolfrith*, a later but equally momentous trauma in Bede's life is made known to us from the preface to the fourth book of his commentary *On First Samuel*. His work on this particular section of the Bible, and the fact that he interjects this highly personal preface as an aside within it, reveals that he harboured a telling personal affinity with Samuel, the prophet-priest, who anointed Saul and David and established the sacral role of kingship mediated through, and regulated by, the priesthood. Samuel was promised to the service of the Lord, by a mother desperate to conceive, and entrusted to the care of the high priest, Eli, in the temple of Shiloh. Bede evidently identified with this, casting his own father figure, Ceolfrith, in the role of Eli and himself as Samuel. Ceolfrith's sudden decision in 716 to vacate his abbacy and travel to Rome, to spend his last days among the tombs of the apostles, caused Bede such severe sorrow that his work on the commentary suffered. Here, in the preface to Book IV (p. 212), Bede shares his trauma and expresses his hopes for his community under Ceolfrith's successor, Hwætberht, nicknamed 'Eusebius'. In the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea had chronicled and legitimized the Emperor Constantine and the early Church, a service performed by Samuel for the early kings of the Israelites. By penning his own *Ecclesiastical History*, in emulation of Eusebius's earlier work, Bede fulfilled the prophetic role in respect of his own people, a task to which he evidently felt himself dedicated in the womb.

One final text conveys much important incidental insight into Bede's personality: his *Letter to Bishop Egbert*, written on 5 November 734, only months before his death in May 735. It may have been a sense of impending mortality that prompted him to unburden himself to the pastoral head of the Church in Northumbria, Egbert bishop of York, over his concerns for the spiritual and physical well-being of its people, and emboldened him to advance his own suggestions for their remedy. In urging Egbert to perform his pastoral role well, Bede dares to overstep the mark in outlining cases of episcopal abuse of power. An injustice that particularly incensed him was the extortion of payments from people in remote areas who scarcely ever saw a cleric, let alone a bishop (p. 347). Bede was not ambitious for advancement within Church and court life, ardently preferring the cloistered existence of the prophetic scholar, teacher and scribe. Nevertheless, he did not lack

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BEDE

political astuteness. His letter suggests reforms (pp. 345, 349), laments the hypocrisy of those who founded pseudo-monasteries on their land for temporal benefits (pp. 351–2) and fears for the military strength of the kingdom should too many youths enter those bogus institutions (p. 350). The tone of this missive, like his letter to Plegwin and certain passages of the *Ecclesiastical History*, reveals that his personality was not entirely one of piety, prayer and scholarly objectivity. Bede, in characteristic human fashion, could harbour a measure of anger and resentment and had his prejudices, especially against those he considered enemies of Northumbria, and of orthodoxy: notably his own detractors, pagans and the ancient British Church.

Bede the ‘Englishman’ and the English vernacular

Bede had a well-developed sense of his own identity and of that which he was creating for his people, and of their place in the wider world and in posterity. To him may be attributed the very concept of ‘Englishness’, a collective nomenclature, derived from his own Anglian ancestry, for an amalgam of peoples of diverse Germanic and Celtic descent. He never travelled far from home, though he probably visited York, Hexham and Lindisfarne. Nonetheless, he dispatched research requests far afield, which were answered by Lastingham, East Anglia, Wessex, London, Barking and Canterbury. Nothhelm, a London priest and later archbishop, even undertook research on Bede’s behalf in the papal archives. Abbot Albinus of Canterbury particularly supported Bede in writing the *Ecclesiastical History*, which was dedicated to King Ceolwulf of Northumbria, who in 737 subsequently abdicated and joined the Lindisfarne community. Bede evidently attracted influential friends, as well as jealous detractors, despite his relatively cloistered existence.

From his little cell Bede nonetheless used his imagination to envision the wider world and the heavenly kingdom. His *On the Holy Places*, reworking Abbot Adomnán of Iona’s account of the Holy Places related to him by the Frankish pilgrim-bishop Arculf around 690, is one of the best early pilgrim guides, used by those who physically visited the Holy Land and those who, like Bede, journeyed there spiritually.⁶ Closer to home, his vivid imagination was nurtured by oral tradition, vernacular poetry and song. Bede would have spoken Old English, in the Northumbrian dialect, resorting to Latin for his religious offices. He played an important role in the development of written English – a role that has been overshadowed by that of King Alfred and his circle in the aftermath of the Viking upheavals during the ninth century. In a letter recounting Bede’s death – a genre calculated to promote his posthumous saintly status – one of his pupils, Cuthbert, describes his last days, spent in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51495-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Bede

Edited by Scott DeGregorio

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Bede's life in context

study and prayer, chanting psalms, antiphons and Old English verse: for he 'knew our poems well'. This account includes 'Bede's Death Song', perhaps of Bede's own composition:

Facing that enforced journey, no man can be
More prudent than he has good call to be,
If he consider, before his going hence
What for his spirit of good hap or of evil
After his day of death shall be determined.⁷

This is the earliest recorded example of Old English poetry, along with 'Cædmon's Hymn', the preservation of which (in Latin translation) we also owe to Bede. As Bede told the story, Cædmon, a monk at Abbess Hild's Whitby, was so embarrassed at the prospect of taking his turn at singing at feasts that he hid with the beasts in the byre until God inspired him to sing:

Now we must praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the
Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how He, since he is
the eternal God, was the Author of all marvels and first created the heavens as a
roof for the children of men and then, the almighty Guardian of the human race,
created the earth. (EH IV. 24, p. 417)

An Old English version of the poem, with dialectical variations, is preserved in the margins of several manuscripts of the *Ecclesiastical History* and in the 'Alfredian' translation of the latter into Old English (see Chapter 15).

The advantages of communicating orally in the vernacular, as well as being literate (i.e. Latinate) in Mediterranean fashion, were fully appreciated by Bede. His *Letter to Bishop Egbert* evinces deep concern that most of the thinly spread priesthood could not read Latin, leading him to translate the *Pater Noster* and Creed into Old English to help such 'illiterate' priests to conduct services and to teach their flocks (p. 346). Even during his final illness, Bede, free from the fears about vernacular Bibles that would later condemn Wycliffe and Tyndale, was translating into English John's Gospel, that the Good News (Old English *Godspell*) might better be shared with all.⁸ For Bede, like fellow missionaries with the pen such as Ulphilas, Cyril and Methodius, recognized the necessity for vernacular translation.

Bede as evangelist-scribe, and contemporary manuscript culture

In response to a letter from Bishop Acca of Hexham Bede writes, in the preface to his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*: 'I have subjected myself to that burden of work in which, as in innumerable bonds of monastic servitude which I shall pass over, I was myself at once dictator, notary and scribe' (p. 7; my